Mom still wasn't home at suppertime, and Jack was hungry, so I made spaghetti with butter. We were eating and watching *Tom and Jerry* when she came in. She turned off our show, put on CNN, and stood there watching in her short sweater dress and knee-high black boots, swaying side to side.

"Where were you, Mom?" I asked.

"Out with some friends." She finally turned her glassy eyes to me and Jack. "Having a good time. Is that all right with you?"

"You could have told us," I said. "We were waiting for you."

She spun around, bracing herself in the doorway, and then headed up the stairs.

"Don't you want to know if Sef called?" I yelled after her.

She stopped and turned around. "Did he?" she said, and her face went pale.

"No."

She went up to her room and didn't come back.

When Dad got home, he asked, "Where's Mom?"

"Upstairs."

"I'm starving. What'd you have for supper?" He turned on the kitchen faucet and splashed water on his face.

"Spaghetti. Want me to heat some up for you?"

"Sure. Thanks, Cass."

"With mushrooms?"

"Throw in whatever's in there."

I heated some sauce, added mushrooms, and poured it over a pile of spaghetti. I gave him a piece of baguette, and he ate and I did my homework. I liked that he didn't ask me a lot of questions that I didn't want to answer. He sopped up the last of the

sauce with some bread and slumped in his chair. He glanced up at his 1994 Red Sox Championship banner and said, "Life is good, Cassie. Don't forget that."

I didn't want to tell him about Mom, but I had to. "Can I say something, Dad?"

"Shoot."

I said, "Mom's been really weird."

He leaned toward me. "Weird how?"

"We didn't even know where she was. She used to make supper every night when Sef was here. Now I don't know. It's like none of us matter or something."

Dad looked at me for a long time. Then he said, "I'm glad you told me. She's having a hard time."

"Dad," I asked, "what's the matter with her?"

"Don't worry," he said.

"I wish she'd be like she used to."

He nodded. "I know."

It wasn't fair. I pulled on my sneakers and Sef's hoodie. I needed to wash it, but it would lose the last smell of Sef if I did. I took off outside, running, gulping the cool air. I wanted to find Sef out there like I did the night I had to apologize to Ben Adams. I wanted to hear him laughing and I wanted him to fill up all that empty space inside me. But all I heard was the pounding of my own feet.

When I got back, Mom was in her bathrobe in the kitchen. Her makeup had been scrubbed off and her hair combed out. "Hi, Cassie." Her voice was cold and hard.

"Hi, Mom." I held my breath.

"Listen, I will take care of telling your father what I do. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, Mom."

"Good."

A Deep Freeze had begun. The next day she said good morning and then she buttoned up her lips for most of the day until she needed someone to watch Jack and then to chop some onions. Jack asked if I could take him to Dana Park. "Ask Mom," I told him. "She's not talking to me."

He frowned and marched over to Mom. "Why aren't you talking to my friend Cass?"

"Because," she said, "I'm not feeling talkative. Now go to the park."

Jack came back. "She's not feeling talkative. I think she's gonna talk to you tomorrow, Cass."

But she didn't. Not tomorrow and not the next day or the day after that.

CHAPTER 16

ONE OF THE GOOD ONES

To: Cassie
From: Blue Sky
Subject: Re: hi from USA

Dear Cassie,

We have electricity and I write email returns. You ask me why my name and I explain. The day America started bombing Baghdad was the day the sky turned gray. The electricity go out for hours at a time and all is dark much of a day. The explosions and helicopters are more loud in the dark. When I remember old Iraq I think of light and blue sky, the color it used to be. So you understand my name now.

In my past I went to school and parties and swimming. I do nothing now and I am tired. What I want? I want to live.

I want my family to live. I try to have hope but it is difficult. I wish to have my spirit back. I wish to be a bird and fly high away. Except the sky is full with smoke and bombs.

I try to answer your questions. It is true I feel pain everyday when I hear the bombs. I feel drowning like you call. When I start to feel the panic I pray. I believe and thank Allah and I go through panic. What you do?

Blue Sky

To: Blue Sky
From: Cassie
Subject: Re: Re: hi from USA

Dear Blue Sky,

Thank you for writing! I was so glad to get your email. I feel like I already know you from reading your blog. Hope you don't mind I have so many more questions for you!

I understand about your name now, but I don't understand what you are saying about the American troops. I thought we were helping. Were things better before the war? Why are we just bombing everything up?

I shouldn't say this, but I keep thinking something bad is going to happen to us. When I am panicked I try to breathe. Sometimes I have to run to breathe right again. That's what I do. I run and breathe until I am normal again.

Today we brought our grades home. My sister Van's grades went down and now she's not on the honor roll anymore. Of course my mother cried and cried about this because Van has always gotten straight As (and Mom cries

all the time about everything since Dad left). What are the girls like there? I want to know more about your life. Tell me if I write too much.

Please be safe. I wonder if there are bombs near you today. How do you stand with the explosions?

Dad is one of the good ones. He really is. My brother Jack wishes he was a marine too. He dresses up like one every day!

Write back, please—
Cassie

To: Cassie
From: Blue Sky
Subject: Re: Re: Re: hi from USA

Hello Cassie,

Is your sister Van sick or hurt? In Baghdad there is no medication or therapy left for those who need it. The girls here are same. Some nice, some not nice. Now what matters most is your last name Shiite or Sunni. In past time it is not important. We live in the same neighborhood, get married, have children, all the same. No difference except how a person pray. Today they ask what is your last name and try to separate Sunnis from Shiites. Sometimes they kill the other. How do you break families apart? If true I have to kill my best friend. My uncle kill his wife. And so on. We are Iraqis—not Sunni or Shiite or Kurd or Turk or anyone.

Everything changes so much here. Before women can wear jeans and T shirt, something like that. Today clothes must cover us up. Women must wear long skirts and headscarves. Men cannot wear shorts even if they play soccer. Only pants. Before it was choice. I think the terrorist do not read the Koran. They make rules to oppress only. Where do these people come I do not no.

Before this country flow with gas. Now we line for gas. Wait 13 hours. It is crazy.

There was no Al Qaeda here before. Now terrorists are here everywhere. At beginning I talk with some soldiers. We give them water and bread. They sweat with all clothes and gear. Some give us candy back. Some talk nice. Maybe your brother Sef is one of these good ones because he is new. Three years and we are tired. We want our life. No tanks, no explosion, no guns, no raids. I try to be positive. It is stupid war. Everything blown to peaces. People lose houses, parents, children, friends.

I study now. Exams all week. Pray electricity stay so I get high marks. Pray for me this week and I pray for your family.

Blue Sky

To: Blue Sky
From: Cassie
Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: hi from USA

Dear Blue Sky,

I read a little about the civil war there, but I don't understand it. Who started it if all the Shiites and Sunnis were living together?

I hope your exams are going well. I hope you got the

highest grades in the class. You must be busy. Do others in your class know about your blog? It's hard to believe men can't wear shorts to play soccer. What would I do? I wear jeans and T-shirts all the time.

My mother would throw a fit if she couldn't drive. But maybe she wouldn't have to worry about that because she'd never be able to wait 13 hours to get gas. Never. If she has to wait for anything for more than a few minutes, she goes crazy. It's weird, ever since Sef left, my family are like strangers. It's like I can't reach anyone. You've been through so much I know I shouldn't complain to you.

I will write again soon.

Cassie